

COPING WITH THE AFTERMATH OF A DELIBERATE ANTHRAX ATTACK

You have recently experienced a highly stressful and threatening event. The exposure of you and your colleagues to anthrax contained in the envelope or package sent to your offices is likely to be very upsetting. Even if neither yourself nor any of your colleagues develop symptoms, the idea that someone would deliberately expose you to anthrax may be extremely difficult for you. Moreover, the timing of this attack, coming in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, makes it even more difficult. Many Americans were already struggling to deal with the emotions that resulted from those attacks. That may be significant for you, your family, and your colleagues, because stress from different sources piles up, challenging one's ability to cope.

Some of the office staff may now be living and/or working in new locations. This disruption and dislocation only adds to the stress of the incident itself. Your future may feel uncertain. You may have financial concerns and feel that things will never be "normal" again. Your family may have concerns for your safety and you may have increasing feelings of protectiveness for your family. This is especially likely if you have children.

You are living through experiences that most people would find emotionally traumatic. These circumstances would challenge anyone's ability to cope. As this situation evolves, the experience may provide even greater challenges to your coping skills, and result in cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and even physical reactions. Such reactions are common, but each individual responds uniquely to traumatic events. Individuals also respond in different time frames. Some people may experience these reactions immediately. Others may experience them months later. Some may never experience any of these reactions. These reactions are not signs of weakness, simply signs of being human.

Below are some reactions common to people who experience traumatic stress. Although these thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and physical reactions can be very upsetting, it is important to remember that they are common reactions to an extraordinary and very stressful situation. It may be useful to remember that your family may also experience these reactions, even though they were not directly involved in the exposure.

Thoughts

- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things, including difficulty concentrating on your work.
- Recurring dreams or nightmares about the event and its aftermath (including the September 11 attacks).
- Reconstructing in your mind the events surrounding the incident itself, in an effort to make it come out differently.
- Questioning your spiritual or religious beliefs.
- Repeated thoughts or memories of loved ones, or of the event itself or the damage that are hard to stop.

Feelings

- Feeling numb, withdrawn, or disconnected.
- Feeling frightened or anxious when things remind you of the incident (even the daily mail delivery at your house).
- Feeling a lack of involvement or enjoyment in everyday activities.
- Feeling depressed, blue, or down much of the time.
- Feeling bursts of anger, or intense irritability.
- Feeling a sense of emptiness or hopelessness about the future.

Behaviors

- Being overprotective of your own and your family's safety.
- Isolating yourself from others.
- Becoming very alert at times, and startling easily.
- Having problems getting to sleep or staying asleep.
- Avoiding activities that remind you of the event itself or the damage; avoiding places or people that bring back memories.
- Having increased conflict with family members.
- Keeping excessively busy to avoid thinking about the event and what has happened to you.
- Being tearful or crying for no apparent reason.

Physical Reactions

(If you have any concerns about your physical reactions, please consult with your physician.)

- Stomach upset, nausea
- Diarrhea, intestinal cramps
- Elevated heart rate
- Elevated blood pressure
- Elevated blood sugar

Coping

Healing and recovering from the emotional effects of the incident may take a long time. When you can, allow yourself to feel sadness and grief over what has happened. Talking to others (family, friends, spiritual leaders) about how you are feeling is important.

Try to keep in place family routines such as regular meal times and other family rituals. These will help you to feel as though your life has some sense of order.

Upsetting times can influence people to drink alcohol or to use drugs in a way that causes other problems. Try to cope with your stress without increasing your use of alcohol and drugs. Alcohol and drugs won't help in the long run.

Healthy practices such as eating well and getting enough sleep are especially important in times of high stress.

Forgive yourself and others when you act out because you are stressed. This is a difficult time, and everyone's emotions are closer to the surface. But also be certain that your stress does not become an excuse for child abuse or spouse abuse. Also try to recognize the role of stress from this incident in interpersonal conflict.

Don't let yourself become isolated. Maintain connections with your community friends, relatives, neighbors, co-workers, or church members. Talk about your experiences with them.

When to seek support from a mental health professional

A few general guidelines may be useful in deciding when normal reactions to traumatic stress become problems requiring assistance:

- 1) when disturbing reactions to an incident last more than six to eight weeks;
- 2) when a person's reactions make it difficult to function normally (including functioning at work, in the family, or at school); or
- 3) anytime an individual feels unstable or concerned about his or her reactions.